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## Stuart Leavenworth: Why can't Corps of Engineers leave our trees be?

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PUBLISHED SUNDAY, MAR. 28, 2010

Three condemned prisoners are waiting to be executed by a guillotine: a priest, a lawyer and an engineer.

The priest is first in line. The warden puts the priest's head in the guillotine and pulls the lever, but nothing happens. The warden suspects that the blade has malfunctioned because of divine intervention. So he lets the priest live.

The warden then places the lawyer's head securely in the guillotine and pulls the lever. Again, nothing happens. The warden sees this as a sign that a beheaded lawyer will result in a costly lawsuit. So he lets the lawyer live.

Then the engineer's head is placed in the guillotine. The warden's about to pull the lever when the engineer interjects: "You know what, warden? I think I know how to fix your problem."

I mention this joke about engineers (told to me by an engineer) because it illustrates a couple of points:

- Engineers often have a sense of humor.
- Some of them become so fixated on the task at hand that they miss the larger picture.

This latter group apparently occupies high offices at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. How do I know this? Because the corps continues to push policies that could lead to clearing of trees along our rivers and streams in the Central Valley.

Blame it on the Katrina syndrome. Following the flooding of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, the corps came under harsh attack for its design and maintenance of levees. In true Army fashion, the corps responded by doing

everything by the book.

One of these books was the "Engineering Technical Letter," which effectively allows only grass on levees. Trees and shrubs are banned.

The rationale for these standards makes some sense. You don't want a big rotting tree being knocked down in a big storm and opening a hole in a levee with its root ball.

Yet not all trees and shrubs compromise the integrity of a levee or the interior flood channel. Trees and plants hold soil in place, and can slow down rushing water, reducing its ability to erode levees.

Moreover, if the corps were to take its policy to the extreme, flood districts would have cut down all riparian forests within these channels, including trees that line the paths of the American River Parkway.

Ever since 2007, when the corps started to rigorously enforce its engineering manual, flood districts and conservationists have pushed back. That year, the Sacramento Area Flood Control District held a science symposium, which found little evidence that trees threaten levees.

The corps itself commissioned a peer review of its policy. That review concluded that the corps was singularly focused on the idea that "vegetation on levees is bad and should be removed. Some vegetation may help stabilize ... levees."

Despite those findings, the corps recently published regulations that could make it extremely difficult for flood districts to avoid cutting down the minuscule amount of vegetation that now lines local rivers. The rules require districts to apply for variances and provide extensive documentation to certify that trees don't compromise a levee's integrity.

They'd have to demonstrate that tree roots near a levee didn't extend into a levee itself. "As a practical matter, you'd have to dig up the levee, check for any roots and reconstruct the levee," says Ron Stork, an advocate for the group Friends of the River.

Conservationists have company in challenging these rules. Leaders of small flood districts say they'd have to spend limited funds to seek the variances. Or they'd be forced to cut down trees.

Yet if they hacked the trees, Fish and Game inspectors might cite them for

destroying riparian habitat.

In a March 10 letter, a planning chief with the California Regional Water Quality Control Board urged the corps to back off from its one-size-fits-all approach. "The proposed policy may affect hundreds of miles of leveed stream channels in the San Francisco Bay Area," wrote Wil Bruhns, planning division chief of the water board's Bay region office.

And that is the irony of the situation. Here in the Valley and across California, the corps has been a partner in both flood control and tree planting to mitigate for some of its construction projects.

Yet far off in Washington, corps officials seem oblivious to the policies they are pushing. They don't seem to get that, here in Northern California, we believe that flood control and river restoration can go hand in hand. We want our rivers to be living rivers, not rock-lined channels designed by engineers with a fixation on quick fixes.

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